

THE WILD TURKEY IN EARLY WISCONSIN

BY A. W. SCHORGER

IT is patently incongruous that a strictly American bird should receive the name Turkey, so a brief explanation of the appellation seems desirable. During the Middle Ages most of the strange and exotic forms of plants and animals came to Turkey from India by caravan and were then shipped to the various European nations. The bird or plant was then called after the country in which it supposedly originated. Our native maize became Turkish wheat. This is by no means an obsolete custom. The Hungarian Partridge (*Perdix perdix*) is not peculiar to Hungary, yet since the birds introduced originally into America came from that country it will be called Hungarian, probably, until the end of time. The Spanish brought to Europe the Mexican race of the Turkey and it is from this stock that our domestic fowl descended. Nevertheless, it was destined to be known as the Turkey or Indian Bird. The Spanish call the Turkey *gallo de India* (Indian cock) or *pavo*, while in France it is known as *coq d'Inde* (Indian cock) or *dindon*.

These preliminary remarks have a direct bearing on the subject, for in attempting to determine the early status of the Eastern Turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo silvestris*) in Wisconsin, the nomenclature is found to be somewhat confusing. Father Hennepin¹ was on the Upper Mississippi in 1680 and his statement that Turkeys occurred at Lake Pepin has been quoted frequently. In his book of travels the terminology becomes decidedly mixed. He mentions that while near Lake Pepin his party killed seven or eight large Turkeys (*coqs d'Inde*). This might be an acceptable statement had he not mentioned, a few pages beyond, that the Indians were very desirous of obtaining guns, having seen three or four Bustards or Wild Turkeys (*Outardes ou Coqs d'Inde*) killed at a single discharge. Here the *Outarde* or *Bustard* becomes synonymous with Turkey. In other parts of his book, it is perfectly clear that both *Coq d'Inde* and *Outarde* do not refer to the Turkey. Lahontan,² who came to Canada in 1683, mentions that he hunted the *Outarde* or *Bustard* on Lake Champlain and used decoys set in the water for this purpose. No amount of wishful thinking could place a Turkey in this situation. The bird that he was hunting was unquestionably the Canada Goose, for *Outarde* is the name by which this species is known in Quebec to this day. Michaux³ shot a Canada Goose at the mouth of the Cumberland River on September 16, 1795, and states that both the French of Illinois and Canada call it Bustard (*Outarde*). Jonathan Carver⁴ (1766) added to his personal observations by pilfering from Hennepin and mentions likewise the occurrence of Turkeys at Lake Pepin. In the absence of further authority, we are forced to the conclusion that Hennepin's Turkeys were Canada Geese.

Usually there is a logical basis for the use of these seemingly peculiar names. I spent considerable time on their possible derivation. The early explorers naturally would call the new American animals by the names of the creatures in Europe that they resembled most closely. The *Outarde* or Bustard is a large stocky bird. The spreading of the tail and other phases of courtship demeanor give it a decided resemblance to the Turkey. Only speculation can be offered for the synonymy of *Outarde* and Canada Goose. It was mentioned above that one of the French names for the Turkey is *Dindon*. The latter when used figuratively, as in paying a compliment to a human being, means a goose. Further investigation of the popular nomenclature by which the Turkey, Canada Goose, and Bustard may be one and the same bird will be left to a person more skilled than I in genetics.

It would seem that the French had muddled the nomenclature sufficiently without additional assistance; yet during the last century there is found a distinctly American contribution. The Sandhill Crane became known as Turkey or Northern Turkey in the region of the Upper Mississippi Valley. The name is heard seldom today except in the prairie provinces of Canada. John Lewis Peyton⁵ was in northern Wisconsin in September, 1848, and mentioned seeing "some wild turkeys" while crossing a plain between LaPointe and the St. Croix River. A hunter in St. Croix County, in 1889, returned home bearing proudly a Wild Turkey that he had killed. Considerable persuasion was necessary to convince him that the bird was a "crane".⁶

Another obvious error is to be found in the reports⁷ of a Wild Turkey having been killed when in reality, or in all probability, it was a domestic bird that had wandered into the timber. As an example, the following letter written at Osceola, Polk County, by an irate farmer under date April 7, 1868, will be quoted in part:

"Mr. Editor:

. . . They may be wild turkies, but if so, they must have run wild the day before he killed them, for at that time they were my *tame* turkies . . .

[Signed] Frederick Greenwold."

In this paper the range of the Turkey will be traced from the northeastern section of the state to the southwestern. Elizabeth Sellentini⁸ came to Green Bay in 1837 and stated that the bird served on Christmas day was the Wild Turkey, "the most beautiful of American birds," and not the domestic one. This statement is not entirely satisfactory since a Turkey could be transported from a considerable distance to the southward during a Wisconsin winter. Fortunately there is corroborating evidence from the approximate latitude of Green Bay. Mrs. Mary Bristol⁹ came to Green Bay in 1824 and during her six years of residence attended a wedding at Grand Kaukaulin (Kaukauna).

There were served for supper "all kinds of wild meat . . . turkey, quail . . . and porcupine with the quills on." The problem in this case was to fix the date of the event. It was found that the wedding was that of Margaret Grignon and that it took place in June, 1829. It is unlikely that at this season game could have been transported any great distance without spoilage. Incidentally, the Menominee Indians have lived in the Green Bay region ever since their first contact with the whites, and they had a Turkey clan.¹⁰

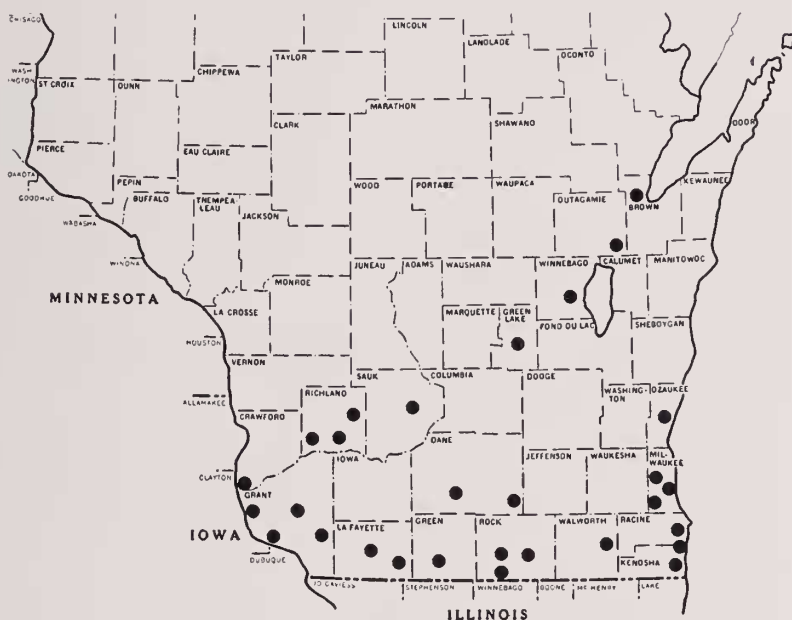


Figure 1. Range of the Wild Turkey in Wisconsin.

One of the earliest and best records for the occurrence of the Turkey in the vicinity of Lake Winnebago is due to the Jesuit, Allouez.¹¹ In April, 1670, he visited the Fox Indians who then resided at Lake Winnebago on the Wolf River. He wrote: "There we saw two Turkeys perched on a tree, male and female, resembling perfectly those of France—the same size, the same color, and the same cry." This statement is too circumstantial not to be accepted at full value. He uses the name *cogs d'Inde*, and the fact that they were sitting in a tree eliminates the Canada Goose and other aliases.

Richard Dart¹² arrived at Green Lake, Green Lake County, in 1840 and he states: "There were likewise wild turkeys and plenty of geese." In spite of the early establishment of Fort Winnebago at Portage there

is no definite statement of the occurrence of the Turkey. Mrs. John H. Kinzie¹³ who came to reside at the fort in 1831, mentions that the Indians used "feathers of the wild turkey" as ornaments in the hair. These feathers might have been obtained by trade or brought from a distance. For example, St. Pierre¹⁴ wrote from his fort at Mount Trempealeau that on May 6, 1736, a party of Sioux warriors was travelling down the Mississippi for the ostensible purpose of hunting Turkeys to secure feathers for their arrows. This letter is further indication also that these birds did not occur at Lake Pepin or even as far north as Trempealeau County.

The surveyor, William H. Canfield,¹⁵ came to Sauk County in 1842 and was attached to the government survey of 1842-43. He had a keen interest in natural history and, in his list of the birds of the county, states that the Wild Turkey occurred formerly. The adjacent county of Richland had large numbers of Turkeys. Judge James H. Miner¹⁶ mentions that when the towns of Willow and Richwood were first settled deer and Turkeys were exceedingly plentiful and furnished the principal meat supply of the early settlers. Mr. Aldo Leopold¹⁷ was informed by George Johnson, district game warden at Richland Center, that he had discussed frequently the early status of game in the county with the Winnebago Indian, Good Bear. Good Bear stated that he had killed Turkeys along the Pine River, presumably while a young man. He died at Kilbourn in 1930 at the reputed age of 103 years.

The notable traveler, H. R. Schoolcraft,¹⁸ was at Prairie du Chien, Crawford County, in 1820, and recorded the Turkey as common along this part of the Mississippi. An army officer¹⁹ stationed at Prairie du Chien wrote on August 23, 1847: "Turkeys and deer are plenty in the woods."

An extension westward of the northern boundary of Crawford County would coincide nearly with the boundary line between Iowa and Minnesota. The latter represents the northern limit of the range of the Turkey west of the Mississippi until the Missouri River is reached.

The Turkey was abundant at times along Lake Michigan at least as far north as Port Washington. Just why the species ranged so much farther north, to Green Bay, in the eastern part of the state than in the Mississippi Valley is difficult to explain. The beech tree has a rather narrow range in eastern Wisconsin but occurs entirely around Lake Michigan. It is possible that beech nuts, of which Turkeys are very fond, combined with a succession of mild winters may have tolled the birds farther north here than elsewhere.

The first mention of Turkeys along Lake Michigan is due to Father Marquette.²⁰ On November 23, 1674, his canoe was beached at the Milwaukee River. He wrote: "Pierre shot a deer, 3 bustards (*outardes*) and three turkeys (*coqs d'Inde*)."²¹ There is no confusion here. Pierre killed three geese and three Turkeys. In October, 1679, Hennepin,²¹

who was with LaSalle's party, mentions that their men "killed some very fat Turkey hens" * in the region between Racine and Kenosha.

Andrew Vieau²² came to Port Washington, Ozaukee County, in the spring of 1838. At that time his only neighbors comprised a single family at Saukville. He mentions that during the following winter he took by ox-team loads of "turkeys, venison, and other game" to Milwaukee for sale, in which enterprise he was very successful.

Wild Turkeys and other game were so abundant in the market in the "village" of Milwaukee in January, 1839, as not to be considered a luxury.²³ A. W. Kellogg,²⁴ came to Milwaukee in January, 1837, and mentions the killing of three birds out of a flock of Turkeys found on the farm at Kellogg's Corners. The species is mentioned as plentiful in 1839 when Martha E. Fitch²⁵ arrived in the village. The last Wild Turkey killed at Milwaukee is stated to have been shot by Dr. E. B. Wolcott in the First Ward in the winter of 1839.²⁶ It is doubtful if this was the last Turkey killed in the vicinity for in December, 1842, there appears the enthusiastic statement: "There are more Turkies, Venison, and other wild game to be found in Wisconsin than in any Territory in the Union."

During the winter of 1827-28, John H. Fonda²⁷ made a trip from Green Bay to Fort Dearborn (Chicago). He found Indians starving in their village on Lake Michigan, in Kenosha County, "though the country was teeming with deer, wild turkies and elk." Wild Turkeys were mentioned in 1844 as occurring near Racine but they were "by no means abundant."²⁸ Dr. P. R. Hoy²⁹ states that they were once very plentiful. The last occurrence for Racine was in November 1846, when a small flock that appeared was hunted with such energy that all the birds were killed. In 1853 he considered them as still abundant in the southwestern counties. A. C. Barry,³⁰ of Racine, did not mention the Turkey in his list of birds published in 1854. It had become so rare that an inhabitant of Racine, on receiving an Illinois Wild Turkey in December, 1859, mentions that it was the first that he had ever seen.³¹

Walworth County once had Wild Turkeys in considerable numbers. Charles M. Baker³² is authority for the statement that in October, 1836, a flock of fourteen was seen in the town of Spring Prairie. A year or two later some birds were killed from a flock of about thirty that wintered in the town.

Turkeys existed at Lake Koshkonong as late as 1842, according to Thure Kumlien who settled there in 1843.³³ The only resident I know who had seen a native Wild Turkey, was H. L. Skavlem † of Janesville.

*The reading is: "Nos gens tuoient de leur côté des poules d'Inde fort grasses & enfin le dixhuitième du mois. . . ." The second London issue of 1698 reads differently: ". . . our Men [killed] a great many Turkey-Cocks very fat and big, wherewith we provided ourselves for several Days. . . ."

† H. L. Skavlem was born in the town of Newark, Rock County, October 3, 1846 and died at Janesville, Wisconsin, January 5, 1939. He resided in the town of Newark until 1880.

He wrote to me on January 29, 1929, that he had the distinct memory of seeing Philip Goss carrying a large Wild Turkey that he had shot, and showing it to his father. This is probably the bird killed in the town of Newark in 1854 and mentioned by him as the last record for Rock County.³⁴ It may not have been the last county record. His son, L. N. Skavlem,¹⁷ informs me that his mother was born in the town of Plymouth, Rock County, March 30, 1851. She remembered, when a child, that a man stopped at their home with two Wild Turkeys tied by the legs and thrown over his shoulder.

The town of Verona, Dane County, was settled in 1837. Bears and Wild Turkeys "were very plenty for a few years after the first settlers came."³⁵ In 1934 and 1935 I interviewed several of the old residents of Green County. Mr. Sylvester Belveal, aged 84 at the time, stated that his mother came to Green County in 1834. The farm was in the "Richland timber." One spring during the maple sugar season she assisted in the capture of a large Wild Turkey. Mr. Willis Ludlow, of Monroe, informed me that his father, A. Ludlow, began his business career by buying merchandise in Chicago and transporting it by wagon to Fort Winnebago (Portage) for sale to the soldiers. He camped by the way and told of seeing Wild Turkeys between the present sites of Monroe and Portage. Turkeys were at one time very common in Stephenson County, Illinois, that borders Green County. John H. Thurston³⁶ tells that Charley Pratt killed seventeen young Turkeys one day in early fall within two miles of Freeport.

Charles Rodolph³⁷ located at Fort Hamilton, now Wiota, Lafayette County, in 1834. At that time there was an abundance of "deer, . . . wild turkeys, grouse . . ." W. R. Smith,³⁸ who was in the lead mining region in 1837, did not see any Turkeys but was told that they were numerous in many parts of the territory.

The highest density of Turkey population occurred undoubtedly in southwestern Wisconsin in the county of Grant. James Lockwood,³⁹ who came to Prairie du Chien in 1816, said: "It was not an uncommon thing to see a Fox Indian arrive at Prairie du Chien with a hand sled, loaded with twenty or thirty wild turkies for sale, as they were very plenty about Cassville, and occasionally there were some killed opposite Prairie du Chien." At that time the Fox Indians had a large village, called *Penah* (Turkey), on the present site of Cassville. In 1828, Fredrick G. Hollman⁴⁰ settled at Platteville. Bear, deer, and wild Turkeys "were to be found in astonishing quantities." Daniel R. Burt⁴¹ mentions the killing of a fine Turkey along the Grant River, near Burton, in December, 1835. At that time flocks numbering from ten to forty birds were to be seen by going a short distance into the timber. As late as 1856, Wild Turkeys sold for as little as twenty-five cents apiece in the streets of Lancaster.⁴²

The Turkey was almost extinct in Wisconsin by 1860. Dr. Hoy⁴³

mentions that one was shot in Grant County in the fall of 1872. The last record of possible acceptance is the statement that one flew over the village of Darlington, Lafayette County, in May, 1881.⁴⁴ It is probable that this bird came from Jo Daviess County, Illinois, just to the southward. Statements⁴⁵ that the Turkey was to be found commonly in Wisconsin at this time are erroneous.

The scarcity of records for the last half of the past century is due to several causes. A large portion of southern Wisconsin was originally prairie, but it would be an error to assume that the Turkey did not use this type of terrain. During summer and early fall it wandered freely into the prairies and oak openings, but during the remainder of the year stayed rather closely to timber. Abel,⁴⁶ writing of Wisconsin and Iowa, in 1838, says that on the prairies "you will find thousands of prairie fowls, wild turkeys, . . .". Thurston³⁶ came to Rockford, Winnebago County, Illinois, in 1837. This county was largely prairie and he mentions that Turkeys were plentiful in the timber along the Pecatonica River, elsewhere being seldom seen. A more important factor affecting our information was the severe winter of 1842-43 when the species was nearly exterminated. It was about this time that the agricultural development of Wisconsin was well under way and soon there were very few Turkeys remaining for incoming settlers to see. It is for this reason also that there is little value in mentioning the negative evidence I obtained during the past decade from many pioneers.

The near extinction of the Wild Turkey is stated succinctly by Dr. Hoy:⁴³ "I am told, by Dr. E. B. Wolcott, that turkeys were abundant in Wisconsin previous to the hard winter of 1842-43, when snow was yet two feet deep in March, with a firm crust, so that the turkeys could not get to the ground; they hence became so poor and weak that they could not fly and so were an easy prey for the wolves, wildcats, foxes and minks. The Doctor further stated that he saw but one single turkey the next winter, and none since." The above winter was known in Wisconsin for decades as the "hard winter."

I will advance at this point a supposition termed the *reservoir* theory. It is axiomatic that a species is most vulnerable on the border of its range. If this were not the case, the border would not exist. Over a long period of years the numerical status of a species is subject to ebb and flow due to weather, food supply, disease, or other causes. Extensive study of early ecological conditions in Wisconsin leads to the conviction that at least three of our native species of birds, the Pinnated Grouse, the Quail, and the Wild Turkey, maintained a foothold in Wisconsin only by virtue of periodic replenishment from Illinois.

The Wild Turkey is a perfect example for the theory. It has been shown above that this species at times ranged as far north in Wisconsin as Green Bay. This extension would be rendered possible by a succession of mild winters. There must have been numerous occasions when

the Turkey was extirpated, or nearly so, due to the severity of the winter. It was mentioned above that Marquette landed at the mouth of the Milwaukee River on November 23, 1674. Though so early in the season, it was cold and over a foot of snow covered the ground. He went on to the present site of Chicago to spend a winter marked by intense cold and deep snow. He wrote in his diary on December 12: "We contented ourselves with killing three or four turkeys, out of many that came around our cabin because they were almost dying of hunger." All animals were affected by the extreme weather and, by the latter part of February, the deer were so lean as to be unfit for food. Since this condition prevailed at Chicago, it is probable that most of the Turkeys in Wisconsin perished during that season.

Direct evidence in support of the theory has been found. In December, 1852, a party of Milwaukee hunters went to Rock Prairie, Rock County. In the course of their hunt they killed seven Wild Turkeys, the largest of which weighed 14 pounds and 9 ounces. The point of most interest is the statement that Wild Turkeys "in droves" had entered Wisconsin due to the noise and hubbub of railway construction in northern Illinois.⁴⁷ That this was the cause for the immigration is open to grave doubt. The important thing is that the Turkeys came. Had primitive conditions prevailed, it is seen easily how Wisconsin would have been restocked.

The recent attempts⁴⁸ to reintroduce the Wild Turkey are not new. In 1887, two pairs of Wild Turkeys from the Indian Territory were brought to Lake Koshkonong by Mr. Gordon and released in the woods to breed under natural conditions.⁴⁹ In 1890 the estimates of their number varied from 23 of pure stock to more than 200 of pure and mixed stock.⁵⁰ Hunters secured "Wild Turkeys" in the vicinity up to 1892. In April of this year a bird weighing eighteen pounds was killed by August Lalk.⁵¹ The difficulty was that the Turkeys wandered away in small flocks and never returned. Aside from lack of suitable environment, disease, and the tendency for the Wild Turkey to become semi-domestic, it is doubtful if a planting will ever become successful in Wisconsin. Biologists have learned that every species requires a certain minimum population to overcome natural hazards and maintain existence. In the case of the Wild Turkey, there are no longer reserves to the southward.

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THE PIGEON. By Wendell Mitchell Levi. Printed at Columbia, S. C., 1941: 8 x 11 in., xxxii + 512 pp. (profusely illustrated). With preface by Dr. Oscar Riddle. Published by the author at Sumter, S. C. \$10.00.

Persons interested in wild birds from the standpoint of field study or merely love of the outdoors are apt to have little use for wild birds in captivity or for those which have been domesticated. A bird is a bird, however, no matter where it is or how much it may have been altered by generations of breeding under man's care and direction. For this reason, serious students of bird biology will recognize that the way birds react under any conditions may contribute enlightenment on their behavior, variation, physiology, and characters in the wild.

The ordinary book on domesticated birds deals almost entirely with empirical details of care and management and pays little attention to the underlying principles involved. Levi's book, "The Pigeon," however, is not an ordinary book. It does not deal so much with details of the breeds and their "standards" as have numerous works in the past, but no previous book on pigeons has treated so comprehensively the scientific aspects of the genetics, physiology, and behavior. In these fields the coverage is surprisingly thorough, and the bibliographic references will prove of the greatest value to anyone desirous of pursuing the subjects further. The discussion of such subjects as the sex ratio, mortality, homing, and the like should prove especially pertinent to students of bird ecology.

Other parts of the book will be of more interest to pigeon raisers and fanciers, but they also contain much of more general interest. Such chapters are, of course, those which deal with the differentiation and breeds, the anatomy, care and feeding, and diseases and their control. In short, this is a book which any bird student would do well to have at hand for reference.—Leon J. Cole.